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Bells ring a wake-up call for climate justice

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Bishop of Greenland Sofie Petersen says a prayer at the ecumenical celebration for climate justice in Copenhagen Cathedral. The glacier stone in her hand was uncovered by the receding inland ice.

As a wave of ringing bells embraced the globe, churches sent a strong message to world leaders gathered at the UN climate summit in Copenhagen: There is only one world and in order to preserve it, bold action needs to be taken now.

"We have only one world, this world, if we destroy it, we have nothing else", said Archbishop Desmond Tutu, speaking at a press conference after an ecumenical celebration for climate justice in the Copenhagen Cathedral on 13 December.

Tutu summarized the churches' message to negotiators and politicians attending the UN summit: "For the sake of your children, of your grandchildren, care for this one world we have [...] Let us have a legally enforceable deal, not a political deal."

Such an agreement would entail developed nations committing to reduce their carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 40 percent by 2020 and by 80 percent by 2050 in regard to their 1990 emission levels. They should also contribute 150 billion US dollars per year to assist developing nations to reduce their own CO₂ emissions and adapt to the consequences of climate change.

The ecumenical celebration, attended by Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, members of the Danish government, participants at the UN climate change summit and a plethora of religious leaders, was hosted by the National Council of Churches in Denmark in collaboration with DanChurchAid and the World Council of Churches (WCC).

In his sermon, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams spoke about fear as the root of excuses to avoid the difficult and costly decisions that the climate change crisis requires - "decisions that will mean real change".

"We meet as people of faith in the context of this critical moment in human history [to say] do not be afraid", Williams said. As "love casts out fear", it also helps to take "the right decisions for our global future".

In order to ensure that the earth is a safe home for future generations, some questions need to be asked today, said Williams. Amongst them: "What would be a healthy and sustainable relationship with this world?" and "How shall we build international institutions that make sure the resources get where they are needed?"

Bells ring a wake-up call

At the end of the celebration, the Dean of the Cathedral Anders Gadegaard introduced the ringing of the bells. At that time, 3 p.m., throughout Denmark, Scandinavia and Central Europe, thousands of church bells rang 350 times to symbolize the 350 parts per million that, according to many scientists, is the safe upper limit for CO₂ in the atmosphere.

Around the world churches joined in a global chain of prayers and bell-ringing for climate justice. Starting in Fiji, in the South Pacific, it sounded throughout the world's time zones to Copenhagen, on to Greenland, right around the earth and back to the Pacific.

Church leaders from the Pacific and Greenland spoke at the press conference in Copenhagen about the consequences climate change is already having in their regions.

The Bishop of Greenland Sofie Petersen, from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, spoke of the impact of climate change on the lives of fishermen and hunters. "Because of the lack of ice on the sea, hunters cannot go hunting like in the earlier days and because of that people cannot get their food", she said.

The president of the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu, Rev. Tofiga Falani, explained that in his country, a Polynesian island nation made up of eight coral atolls, there is no place

higher than four feet (1.2 metres) above sea level. He pleaded to rich countries to be heedful of the consequences of their development for thousands of people living on those low-lying atolls. "We want to survive!" Falani said.

Half a million people for climate justice

Earlier in the day, Desmond Tutu handed over to Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, a clock representing over half a million signatures for climate justice.

Climate change effects are being felt most "by those who did not cause it, the poor and the vulnerable", Tutu said, speaking before a crowd at Copenhagen's City Hall Square. This is the "injustice of climate change", that poor countries are the ones "that have to pay for something they didn't cause".

The signatures were collected in more than 20 countries by the Countdown to Copenhagen campaign, a coalition of ecumenical development and humanitarian aid organizations.

The 512,894 signatories committed to reducing their personal contribution to CO2 emissions through recycling, reusing and reducing consumption, and to press political leaders for a climate change agreement that is fair to poor countries.

In receiving the campaign's clock, Yvo de Boer said that in spite of world leaders' concerns about financial, economic and industrial crises, "it is a moral crisis that is standing in the way of us addressing an environmental crisis".

"Let your voices be heard", concluded de Boer, "because Copenhagen is the one chance we have to get this right".

Sound recordings from the different events

Photo gallery

Video of Desmond Tutu handing over the Copenhagen pledges to Yvo de Boer

Video of the ecumenical celebration (Danish television)

WCC activities for climate justice

More information about the worldwide ringing of bells


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